

Martina VUK, *Theological Perspectives on Reimagining Friendship and Disability*, Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature, Cham, 2023, 184 pgs.

Theological Perspectives on Reimagining Friendship and Disability is a 2023 book published by Martina Vuk in an edition of *Springer Nature* and *Palgrave Macmillan*. The book consists of approximately 200 pages (XV + 184) and is divided into three chapters.

The book is a timely and astonishing piece of work that brings together the theological and socio-ethical perspectives on emerging themes of disability, friendship, and vulnerability. Its main idea, as it is developed through three chapters, is rethinking of an anthropology of friendship from the perspective of theology and disability with a suggestion of respect for human dignity and a person's vulnerability as a criterion in reconsidering such an anthropology. The book consists of a threefold structure: The Context of Friendship: From Aristotle to Facebook; Disability Studies and Disability Theology Perspectives on Disability and Friendship; Reimagining of an Anthropology of Friendship: The Implication of the Notion of Vulnerability and Solitude. Each chapter explores the nature, key ideas, and implications of themes investigated.

In the first part (pp. 1-60) Vuk portrays the arc of perspectives on classical, modern, and contemporary approaches to friendships, including Facebook (Meta) friendship. The chapter examines a selection of classical authors including Aristotle and the biblical world, especially the New Testament (St Paul and Johannine) scholarship; whereas the mainstream modern and contemporary scholarship on friendship includes an analysis of academic fields of philosophy, sociology, and theology. The contribution of modern authors' perspectives on friendship implies the work of Jacques Derrida, Lawrence A. Blum and Elisabeth Telfer, C.S. Lewis, and Hugo De Graaff.

The main hypothesis of this chapter is that the classical idea of friendship is guided by the high notion of similarity which is exclusive to friendship between different people such as master and slave, man and woman, and eventually people with disabilities, as they were by ancient authors considered to be less human. Therefore, Vuk is right when she considers at the beginning of the book that friendship is »one of the themes that carry universal application

and essential value for the moral development of the human« (p. 1). The New Testament friendship, more precisely Jesus' friendship with his disciples in the paradigm of washing the feet of his disciples (»*I no longer call you slaves, but friends*«), overpasses this similarity and instead proposes love as *agape* – as a main criterion of perfect love. Jesus' friendship is obviously more than Aristotle's strict hierarchy of roles that is shown through »goodwill«, »justice«, »good-wishing«, »pleasure«, »utility«, or »virtue«. The main idea of this chapter seems to look at how a modern and virtual conception of friendship diverges from or is congruent with the previously mentioned classical authors. The outline of the correlation of themes discussed demonstrates tensions in thinking about friendship. These include a tension in thinking about friendship as something related to virtue and/or emotion, a tension between those who think about friendship as a personal/intimate matter, and those who think about friendship as a communitarian or political matter. There is also a tension between those who think about friendship as a particular interruption including difference and those who think about friendship in more universal terms. The very correlation of themes following from such tensions centres on the importance of friendship for moral growth (philosophy); the meaning of *philia* (philosophy and theology); the correlation and tension between love as *eros*, *phil-*

ia, and *agape* (moral philosophy, theology); the place of virtue in friendship (philosophy, ethics); the role of emotion in friendship (sociology, psychology); friendship and its connection to the stability of the political community (philosophy); friendship as shared activities, including reciprocity, the meaning of well-wishing (benevolence) and flourishing; woman-woman and woman-man friendship (philosophy, theology, sociology). Vuk demonstrates that the account of dissymmetry, instability, or inequality of Aristotle's friendship, when applied to the context of contemporary disability discourses, appears exclusive to friendship between people with and without disabilities, where people without disabilities are often considered superior to people with disabilities due to the difference of some deficiency in character, cognitive capacity, and social status of the disabled person. The biblical friendship that in this approach includes the perspective of Paul's letters and John's Gospel, contrary to ancient friendship, opens the possibility of friendship among those with differences and friendship with God as a supernatural dimension of friendship. Grounded in the person of Christ, this friendship is not only inclusive of all but, because it is Christian, it should not be separationist, biasedly normative, or elitist.

The modern idea of friendship, whose moral ground after Christendom continued to integrate the concep-

tion of differences into its friendship framework, became a matter of personal choice. The element of personality, on the one hand, creates a strong sense of individualism, which leads to friendship becoming isolated or private in form, whereas, on the other hand, the focus on emotion supplies friendship with a »feeling« of belonging, close to romantic love. Vuk successfully tries to present the particular conception of friendship with modern philosophers such as Derrida, Blum, Telfer, and through the theological and sociological aspect. One of the interesting fields of Vuk's reflection is the new consideration on friendship in our technological society. Impacted by the apparatus of a techno-liberal approach to the person and community, Facebook friendship, as an extended version of late modernity's friendship, is a rather controversial form of social networking, as on the one hand it is a great tool to enlarge inclusion and support privacy, but on the other hand it could also create further isolation, alienation and risk false presentation of personality (p. 46-50).

This, in a nutshell, means that the pluralistic society, with its mobility and speed, impacted the modern notion of the other, and even more the contemporary networks of social relationships. Not only has the notion of the other been impacted by such changes, but so has the approach to friendship. Instead of looking merely at Aristotle's friendship, characterized by a strict hierarchy

of roles, the Christian (New Testament) context provides a better solution to overcoming the gap of hierarchical differences. It proposes that friendship and love are interchangeably interwoven and that the process of befriending the other based on selfless love, before all, implies self-disclosure and trust (p. 26).

The second chapter (pp. 61-127) examines the caveats surrounding the meaning of disability and friendship in the perspective of two academic fields – disability studies and disability theology. The primary aim of this chapter is to outline the main features of the models of disability, past and contemporary approaches to disability definition, and the main rationale of the academic field of disability studies. The medical model in disability studies, poststructuralist and postmodern approaches, and social model are explored. With respect to the medical model, Vuk emphasizes the so-called rehabilitation model, charity model, human rights paradigm and traditional or religious model. The poststructuralist and postmodern approaches underline the radical, environmental and bio-psycho-social approach, whereas the social model shows the socio-relational, social minority, socio-economic and social adaptation model. This chapter also portrays the main features of the history of disability as well as key concepts within the emerging field of disability theology. The author demonstrates initiatives and attitudes within the Catholic tradition to

ward the disabled and the recent positive shifts, particularly after the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World-Gaudium et Spes, whose appeal for the respect of the rights and human dignity of every person has been of significant importance in this regard (Gaudium et Spes, n. 12-14, 1965). Vuk rightly notices the lack of dialogue on disability in theological ethics and theological anthropology. For this reason, this book offers important insights on the topic of disability, friendship, and vulnerability. Exploring and presenting the reflections not only of the Catholic Church, but also of the classical Church fathers, she shows that it is possible to build a reliable theology of disability in connection with the friendship that Jesus showed to his disciples. The chapter also looks at approaches to friendship development and their application to contemporary scholarly discussion on friendship and disability, as well as its practical realization within concrete situations. This includes a comparison between two the empirical disability studies and their examination of friendship among people with disabilities, and a comparison between the theoretical work of John Swinton and Hans Reinders whose theological contribution to the field of theology of disability and anthropology of the ethics of friendship has been of important value. The chapter searches whether the views on friendship involve ideas crucial for reimagining the

anthropology of friendship inclusive of people with disabilities. It also suggests the reinterpretation of friendship anthropology and theological rethinking of disability, especially within realms where people with disabilities were stigmatized and excluded from participation in Christian community and friendship.

Vuk invites the reader to think critically about modern ideas of personhood and adds that the key problem in discussing friendship and disability within the realm of late modernity is anthropological. This goes beyond merely thinking of facets of human nature, the human person, and the human being, implying an exploration of anthropological and theological systems regarding friendship and disability. Apart from the fact that the renewal of certain anthropological categories in this regard represents a search for a deeper understanding of friendship, attentive to the lives of people with disabilities, it also addresses such an anthropology as inclusive and Christocentric. As Christ through his incarnation brings back his whole dignity to humans, disability for Vuk is »a human experience of the embodied condition understood as difference« (p. 119). Such difference is not the source of discrimination, but complementarity. It is a sign of wholeness.

The reader can find a more profound answer to that problematics in the third chapter (pp.129-175), which

rethinks friendship anthropology implying the notion of vulnerability and concerns for others based on Paul Ricoeurs' notion of solicitude as an important element in rethinking friendship anthropology. Vuk reminds the reader that to portray friendship as a highly inclusive relationship and as a moral and ethical category, requires dialogue with the voices of people with disabilities, not without them. Therefore, it could be inconsequential to discuss disability without disabled people. If, on the contrary, anthropology of friendship is exclusive of certain categories of people because they are people of different social classes, nations, economic statuses, religions, or intellectual or cognitive capacities, it fails to be open and, so to speak, remains closed in a framework of partial intellectualist morality. This challenge, according to Vuk, entails that friendship which includes people with disabilities does not require a completely new *philia*. It requires a reimagined notion of *philia* that includes something of equal value shared by and constitutive of all humans. For Vuk, the proposed element of vulnerability and solicitude are integral for rethinking the anthropology of friendship, as they not only portray the friendship anthropology as inclusive and open to more than vulnerable people (in this case, people with disabilities), but also address the question of dissimilarity as a problematic issue in the contemporary realm.

Thus, this book contributes to the proposal of a self-critical epistemological suspicion of theological and disability anthropology as something beneficial for grasping a better knowledge of the concepts associated with inclusion, disability, friendship, and vulnerability. The main contribution this book can have includes the field of disability theology where Vuk's book can be of valuable importance, but also to the field of social ethics and social work, disability bioethics, as well as the field of critical disability studies and special education. The book successfully realizes a strong relationship between three main themes that are not explored enough in theological studies: friendship, disability and vulnerability, but not separately in a philosophical, social and theological way. It does it with intra/interdisciplinarity, focusing on a new way to build theological ethics and anthropology that seriously deals with the »trinomen« friendship-disability-vulnerability. In the midst of such trinomen is a human being with its inviolable dignity. To my knowledge, this is the first time we have a systematic theological ethics of that trinomen. The book is designated to all interested in disability inclusion, anthropology of vulnerability and moral philosophy, as it is directed towards re-valorization of friendship as a morally established category that bears universal significance expressing a particular way of belonging. Therefore, this book is both a theoretical and

practical reflection on understanding on the idea Pope Francis expressed in *Laudato si'*: »Everything is connected« and invited us to rethink our common belonging and interdependency in *Fratelli Tutti*. Vuk does not just state it in

this book, she demonstrates it in many philosophical, theological and ethical ways. The book deserves to be textbook both for university studies and for associations that deal with friendship, disability, and vulnerability.

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